

## Between Miami-Dade and transit money, a ‘web’ of politics awaits



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When Esteban “Steve” Bovo headed to Tallahassee earlier this year, the chairman of the Miami-Dade Commission’s Transportation committee had a bold plan to pitch: a new commuter rail connecting the existing Metrorail system to the western suburbs.

The pricey blueprint for the \$102 million connection in Florida’s largest county had its share of detractors in the state capitol. In particular, lawmakers from Miami-Dade itself questioned the attention paid to the western reaches of Miami-Dade when commuters in the south and north wanted rail, too.

“We expect the north and the south to be priorities ,” said Rep. Kionne McGhee, a Democrat whose district includes the area of southern Dade pushing for its own rail extension. “We will challenge anyone and everyone that presents a plan that reduces the voices of the people from the north and the south to the bottom of the pile.”

Bovo acknowledged the cross-county friction in Tallahassee: “We kind of got in this argument up there over which corridor should go first.”

The episode illustrates the complex politics involved in transit expansion, which often depends on state and federal dollars to get beyond the planning stage. A recent Miami-Dade Ethics Commission investigation of a county transit lobbyist offered a detailed look at some of those complexities, and how the push and pull of transportation funding plays out in the state capital and beyond.

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**WE WILL CHALLENGE ANYONE AND EVERYONE THAT PRESENTS A PLAN THAT REDUCES THE VOICES OF THE PEOPLE FROM THE NORTH AND THE SOUTH TO THE BOTTOM OF THE PILE.**

Fla. Rep. Kionne McGhee, D-Miami

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At the center of the probe sits Fausto Gomez, a longtime lobbyist for both Miami-Dade and the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, an independent toll board known as the MDX. A Nov. 10 report by the ethics commission accused Gomez of having “sabotaged” Miami-Dade’s transportation efforts in Tallahassee by pushing legislation that would have given the MDX control of special transit districts that Bovo and other commissioners intended to

be run by the county itself.

Gomez claimed the allegations ignored the complex realities of transit politics, as well as the need for a unified transportation front that melds the priorities of the MDX, Miami-Dade and other players into a single request.

Miami-Dade lawmakers “did not intend to pursue or advance individual, piecemeal projects of various County officials,” Gomez lawyer Benedict Kuehne wrote in a Sept. 23 letter to the ethics commission. “[B]ecause Mr. Gomez was experienced in the often complex and inconsistent web of transportation planning, coordination and funding, he used his considerable experience to navigate a potential ‘win-win’ solution for Miami-Dade County.”

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**I THINK IT WOULD BE WISE ON OUR PART TO BE AS AGGRESSIVE AS POSSIBLE.**

Miami-Dade Commissioner Esteban “Steve” Bovo

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The bill Gomez pushed included a provision to divert some revenue from tolled express lanes in Miami-Dade to county transit projects, and a plan to tap new state dollars for local transit projects by having MDX receive the money instead of the county itself. Given that Miami-Dade was sanctioned in a federal probe over the misuse of transit funds in 2011, Gomez argued the MDX — whose board includes a seat for the state Transportation Department — would be a “far more palatable” option than the county itself.

With the MDX in charge of tolls on some of Miami-Dade’s busiest highways, the agency is a favorite punching bag for local politicians. That low standing gets attention in the ethics report, too.

Bernardo Escobar, head of legislative affairs for the MDX, told an investigator that the toll board is the “ugly stepchild among local agencies.” MDX director Javier Rodriguez said that in private conversations with Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez, Gimenez supported some elements of the legislation MDX wanted but saw the authority as politically “toxic” because of an unpopular expansion of tolls in 2014.

An MDX spokesman declined to comment Friday. Gimenez spokesman Michael Hernández said the mayor was open to an alliance with the MDX if it meant more dollars for transit.

“The mayor wouldn’t be opposed to securing state funding through MDX,” Hernández said. “The mayor’s goal is to ease traffic congestion through Miami-Dade County.”

The ethics report details the friction between various players in Miami-Dade’s transit push, including the resistance Bovo experienced from McGhee and others on the east-west rail. Kuehne told an ethics investigator that Bovo’s “remarks to lawmakers during the past legislative session caused the County to lose support for its legislative package.” He accused Bovo of blaming Gomez for the legislation dying in committee as a way to obscure the commissioner’s own role in the failure of the legislation, which never got out of committee.

Bovo denied the accusations, calling them “a blatant misrepresentation of the salient facts at issue in the case.” The ethics staff sided with Bovo, saying Gomez’s actions “raise serious questions about whether the County’s interests were subordinated to those of the MDX, which also had been paying Gomez to advance its own legislative agenda.”

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**MDX IS THE “UGLY STEPCHILD AMONG LOCAL AGENCIES.”**

Bernardo Escobar, head of legislative affairs for the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority

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Bovo wanted to pay for the east-west rail, which would have used existing cargo tracks, with new districts using property taxes to fund transit expenses. He and other county officials said the zones were to be the centerpiece of Miami-Dade’s legislative agenda in 2016. Bovo said he was shocked to see the bill Gomez submitted created the districts, but put MDX in charge of them instead of the commission itself.

Beyond the swipes between Bovo and Gomez, the ethics report captures the challenges facing elected leaders as they try to implement a ballyhooed “SMART” plan to revive Miami-Dade’s promise to expand rail throughout the county. That pledge was made in 2002 when voters approved a special half-percent sales tax for transit, which has yet to yield enough extra track to accommodate a 5K foot race, much less new commuter lines in areas not served by the 25-mile Metrorail system.

While the SMART plan calls for equal efforts to develop rapid transit in six corridors throughout Miami-Dade — be it rail or some sort of high-tech bus network — nobody seems to think those corridors could be built simultaneously. Gimenez, fresh off reelection last week, said he’s planning a major announcement soon on at least one corridor.

Speculation has centered on the South Dade corridor, since it's home to the 20-mile stretch of road known as the Busway, which is reserved for county express buses. It could accommodate track for a light-rail system too, which a recent study said would cost about \$1.5 billion to build.

Bovo said he would support moving forward with the south corridor first if that would mean starting a project. He said he sees the stakes higher than just whether Miami-Dade will finally move forward on expanding rail. If the county can't find a way to use the transit sales tax to build the promised rail lines beyond the 2.4 miles built to connect the Metrorail to the airport in 2012, he said elected leaders could face a push by voters to repeal the tax altogether.

"I think it behooves us to make sure something happens," he said. "I'm not going to be an obstacle to another corridor happening just because the one I'm interested in doesn't go first. There's a lot of ripe conditions for going south. I think it would be wise on our part to be as aggressive as possible."



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### COMMENTS

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**Micco Mann** · University of Miami

Tolls should be controlled by elected officials, not by a board of unelected officials. Period. Less is more and MDX has to go.

Reply · 5 · Nov 19, 2016 6:27am



**Manny Fernandez** · Florida International University

You really want the same idiots that selected Trump voting on this issue?

Reply · 1 · Nov 19, 2016 8:48am



**Adam Old** · Director of Communications at TransitAlliance.Miami

If the point of tolls is to find a legitimate price for driving unimpeded from the suburbs to downtown, then they should be set dynamically to achieve whichever speed of traffic the politicians think is ideal. This will be expensive during rush hours and collect more \$ than is needed for maintenance.

If the point is just to pay for existing maintenance and operations, then they should set the price as low as it will go to achieve that and the roads will be packed with traffic just like I-95.

Either option needs a viable transit alternative for people in those suburbs.

Reply · Nov 19, 2016 10:46am